Chapter I: "¿Qué gigantes?"

[1]

Each of my anxieties stares me in the face as I lay the tarot cards across the table. Though my reasons for trusting them are not rational, the knowledge they reflect back to me is often invaluable. The connections I draw might seem arbitrary, apparent only to myself, but the cards seem to warn me of enemies, financial struggles, disunities in friendships and love, failure in my endeavors, and poor health. The archetypal figures dating back to the earliest known 15th century cards still appear in the highly illustrative

[1] Adriaen de Vries, Equestrian portrait of Rudolf II, 1600.

Rider-Waite deck that I use for my own divination. These undying characters confirm basic human fears of living in the world, and there is something reassuring about giving these intangible anxieties a material form. Those fears become mystical entities, or Things, which in turn call for other mystical Things as their antidotes. It is much easier to burn sage and wear positive energy talismans than it is to accept that the reasonable actions I take in my life may not lead to their expected results. Magical thinking may not catalyze material effects, but it does offer irrational comfort in an equally irrational world.

[2]

What I have drawn from my own and others’ sentimental understandings of the “magical” qualities of Things is that there is no essence to the relationships between humans and objects—they shift through time, culture, language, religion, and the forms of beings and things themselves. In his essay “Things and Words: Toward a Lyrical Museum,” Mikhail Epshtein differentiates between the “object,” which is purely material,

[2] Card of the Magician, taken from the Visconti-Sforza, Tarot de Marsailles, and Rider-Waite

and the "Thing,"[3] which is always surrounded by a discourse between an object and an animate subject.[4,] The Thing is always an object, whereas the object must *become* a Thing by means of human interaction. The museum as a (multi)cultural institution aims to abstract subjectivity from its displays' "Thingness" by attributing collective significance to their constituents, excised from the domestic context in which the individual organically establishes a unique relationship with his/her material object(s). Nevertheless, it is the individualized conception of the object as a Thing—even in its abstracted, formal display—that gives meaning to material. For the sake of clarity, I am adapting Epstein's language and using the capital "T" to differentiate a Thing—a material object with innate or projected importance—from the physical thing or object that is not illuminated by any particular significance. That which constitutes a Thing is subjective, and that subjectivity is constructed from the material that constitutes consciousness in a given culture and time. I do not wish to argue that there is an inherent meaning or quality to Thingness, other than its fluidity; I seek to portray a few windows into the lives of objects that may help us understand our own relationships with perpetually vanishing material worlds.

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[3] Epshtein uses the words п р е д м е т (*predmyet*) for "object" and в е щ ь (*vyesch)* for "Thing."

[4] Inspired by Martin Heidegger's ontology of things, this type of object-subject-thing discourse is not singularly theorized by Epstein. There is the emerging field of object-oriented ontology, but I will not be addressing it because I am not particularly interested in the metaphysics of non-human existence. Notions similar to Epstein's are expressed inversely in Bill Brown's *Thing Theory*, which appeared in "Things," a specially edited issue of *Critical Inquiry* released in 2001. Brown sees the "thing" as the site of the absence of the meaning that is attached to objects, whereas Epstein allocates the "object" as the item which exists outside human discourse—these two ideas seem so interconnected that it is certainly possible the primary difference here is perhaps one of translation, which is why I noted the original Russian terminology. Furthermore, Epstein's analysis leans more toward a philological connection, an exploration of human-object relationships through the human-object expressions of Russian language. The earlier publication date (1995) and Russian linguistic dimensions the argument made Epstein's theory seem more appropriate than Heidegger's or Brown's in the context of my Slavic grandparents' personal museum of things.

Chapter I: "¿Qué gigantes?"

When we see parts of ourselves in objects, we begin to objectify ourselves as the material of history and its tales—becoming both the subject and objects of our own stories. I begin my exploration of the construction of subjectivity through objects by looking at the Renaissance-era *Kunstkammer* (art cabinet) of Holy Roman Emperor Rudolf II. This early museum-like space was established during the late 16th century, a period of social transformations provoked by the declining power and the Church, a surge in cultural and economic interchange, and the rise of Humanism. This pre-industrialized world illustrates an early example of a man who defined his subjectivity with his objects before capitalism created the financial conditions for most individuals to create themselves through their things. The Things that Rudolf collected had magical qualities that tied the emperor to the external world and gave him power through them. The emperor and his *Kunstkammer* were birthed from a time that did not differentiate between science and alchemy, between astronomy and astrology; science and mysticism were bound together in the Things that comprised Rudolf's domesticated microcosm of the universe. The ways that Rudolf would have understood the functions and aesthetics of his possessions are no longer possible in the modern (Western) world, but they show us some of the foundations of the ways we relate to objects in our personal and public museological spaces.

I consider the narrative possibilities of Things as I begin to explore the spiritual and psychological life of Holy Roman Emperor (1576-1612) Rudolf II through his *Kunstkammer,* or cabinet of art and curiosities. Rudolf's searches for and acquisitions of objects that were known to have healing and magical powers are well documented and prominently featured in both academic and popular literature about the Emperor. In

keeping with what I imagine to be Rudolf's preferred vocabulary, I use the word "magic" in relation to Things rather than terms like fetishistic, animistic, or religious in an effort to dissolve the distinction between Christian relics and the worldly humanism that characterized the context of materialities in Renaissance Europe. Though he held the title of Holy Roman Emperor, the metaphysical dimension of Rudolf's relationships with his objects was by no means held within the bounds of Catholic ritual. Rudolf's interest in occult knowledge, his atypical social behavior, and his penchant for collecting curio—objects of science, ritual, and exotic cultures—are as frequently recorded in history as his diplomatic influence. He made no great strides in his political career; the story of his reign is a tragedy of physical and mental illness, declining power, and familial betrayal. Instead, Rudolf II's heroic legacy was as the father of the Eastern European Renaissance, the founder of Prague as an international, intellectually and artistically rich cultural center.

Before Rudolf chose to leave Vienna and make the Prague Castle the Holy Roman Emperor's permanent home in 1583, the city appeared nearly untouched by Western Europe's Renaissance. Though Holy Roman Emperor Charles IV catalyzed Prague's first modern cultural reform in the 14th century—renovating the Prague Castle, constructing New Town, and establishing Charles University—his efforts were brought to a dramatic halt by a deluge of political and religious upheavals. The emperor's son and heir, King Wenceslas IV, was overthrown and executed by the religious rebel-reformer Hussites, in the early 15th century. His defenestration[5] led to the onset of the Hussite wars, which were to plague Prague's political and cultural landscape for years to come. It

[5] I learned that there was a specific word for throwing someone out of a window during a guided tour of the Prague Castle. It was apparently a very popular method of execution in Czech history.

was amidst this moment of upheaval that the Habsburg family inherited the Holy Roman Empire. While Prague faded from the cultural landscape, the new royal family championed the trend of intellectual and cultural life in Vienna. It was in this climate of Humanist pursuits that the young Rudolf came to admire his father Maximilian II's world of knowledge.

Rudolf II not only developed the largest and most diverse contemporaneous collection of art and curio; he also curated an impressive assembly of artists, scholars, alchemists, rabbis, astronomers, and natural scientists to occupy the royal court of Prague. The emperor's reign coincided with the age of exploration and beginnings of modern science; Rudolf's court displayed contemporaneous Europe's excitement about the fruits of global trade, cultural interchange, and imperial expansions. The essence of the world that the emperor sought to harness in Prague was concentrated ten-fold in his *Kunstkammer*, the home of many of the national treasures that became emblematic of a modern Prague. When Rudolf learned of the existence of an object with certain mystical powers, he demanded it to be brought to him for inspection; he was notorious for accepting unsolicited "gifts" and "borrowing" objects from surrounding royal and monastic collections. He was an enthusiastic patron of the arts with a particular interest in commissioning portraits of himself and large-scale voluptuous female nudes.[6] Everything Rudolf collected, studied, and endorsed was meant to create an equal balance of purpose and pleasure. Perhaps Rudolf aimed to account for his political shortcomings by procuring symbolic objects and persons to take their places. He used the freedom and economic power awarded to him by his title to pursue enlightenment—an act that may

[6] Paula Findlen, "Cabinets, Collecting and Natural Philosophy" in *Rudolf II of Prague: The Court and the City* ed. by Eliska Fucikova, James M. Bradburne, Beket Bukovinska, Jaroslava Hausenblasova, Lumomir Konecny, Ivan Muchka and Michal Sronek. (New York: Thames and Hudson Inc., 1997), 209-19.

well have had diplomatic implications in the emperor's understanding of his place in the world. It seems that Rudolf understood his *Kunstkammer* and the studies it made possible as instruments of political influence.

The role of the *Kunstkammer* as a political tool was not bound to the time-space of its corporeal presence; Rudolf used his collection to create a mythology of himself for the future. Though we remember him through history because he held the title of Holy Roman Emperor, Rudolf's function as a political leader is not the material of his biographies. He reads as a sort of tragic hero, a likeable character who couldn't quite perform the plot laid out before him. Russian novelist Ivan Turgenev wrote that there are two kinds of narrative protagonists: Don Quixotes and Hamlets. A Don Quixote is an idealistic, sanguine personality, one who responds in accordance to his beliefs before he over-thinks them; he is often misinterpreted as a fool but should be taken as a symbol of humanistic self-sacrifice. A Hamlet is melancholic and cripplingly self-conscious; he is in a perpetual stasis of suffering prescribed by the conditions of his own consciousness, so preoccupied with his own existential questions that he is unable to participate in life outside of himself. The juxtaposition Turgenev draws is one between perfect and imperfect ideological motivations—Don Quixote's energy bursts through in trajectories; Hamlet's moves in circles. Though Turgenev's exaggerated distinctions were pulled from Russian and European literary characters, they represent dual impulses inherent to human beings.

I present this analogy as a means of drawing attention to the role of authorship in the dissemination of histories before I continue my own narrative of the events of Rudolf's life. There are very few people in the world who are wholly selfless or

narcissistic, all passion or all intellect, impulsive or calculated. Most of us exist somewhere between these extremes, yet when we describe people aside from ourselves, they become characters drawn from two-dimensional characteristics. Much of what I have read about the emperor paints him as a Hamlet, a character trapped in thought, immersed in the metaphysical questions inherent to philosophy, science, and religion—so enrapt in his own personal enlightenment that he is unable to engage with his political affairs. Historians like Peter Marshall, the author of *Rudolf II and His Magic Circle*, tend to focus on the exciting but speculative aspects of Rudolf's personality that portray a theatrical descent into madness. I see that there is a way in which a collector's mania is the quintessential imperfect[ive] endeavor—the act of forming a collection is never to be completed. But was it really mania, a compulsion, some other pathology that inspired the emperor's collection? We can only imagine how each of the *Kunstkammer*'s objects created Rudolf's world. Just as Don Quixote sought to revive chivalry, it seems that Rudolf II planned to resurrect classical humanism through his pursuit of universal knowledge.

The desire to domesticate all elements of humanism is embodied in the *Kunstkammer*, which was much more than our modern conceptions of a museum; it behaved as a library, a laboratory, a zoo, an observatory, a garden, a gallery, and a temple. The collections of antiquities and Roman coins, atlases, guides to plants and animals, religious texts, mysterious manuscripts, and other exotica told a multitude of histories of the world. Rudolf used the spaces he created to study astronomy, clockmaking, Kabbalah, natural sciences, and alchemy with the scientists and scholars he brought into the court and the instruments he commissioned. The art cabinet itself

occupied three rooms of the northern wing of the Prague castle. There was a section for paintings and sculptures, a section for treasures and artifacts from the natural world, and a series of cabinets containing manuscripts and man-made instruments. Rudolf placed the paintings in stacks against the walls, kept freestanding pieces in the middle of their appropriate rooms, and displayed the rest of his objects on tables and in cabinets separated by their respective genres.[7] Erotic nude paintings aside, Rudolf was particularly drawn to collecting art that displayed mythical scenes and images of the cosmos, books containing incantations or otherwise connected to the occult, magical objects and scientific specimens that demonstrated the vast diversity of flora and fauna beyond Europe.

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[7] Beket Bukovinska. "The *Kunstkammer* of Rudolf II: Where it Was and What it Looked Like" in *Rudolf II of Prague* (1997), 203.

[8] Gouache painting sent to Rudolf II from his ambassador to Spain in 1579 of objects he could purchase for the royal *Kunstkammer*. They represent an anterior horn from an African rhino, a tooth, a piece of skin and a covered goblet made from rhino horn. Author unknown, 1579.

Some favorites amongst the *Kunstkammer*'s collection included an *Ainkhuen* (a unicorn/narwhal tusk), a decorated rhinoceros horn, and a gold chalice the emperor believed was the Holy Grail.[9] These magical objects became tools for Rudolf to expand the reputation of his imperial power, fueled by the grand illusion that with these objects, he could learn to control nature.

The home of these mystical and mysterious objects was both an escape from the world and a microcosm of it. The *Kunstkammer*'s collection was split into equal parts of *artificiala* (man-made) and *naturalia* (of nature); these two terms describe the position of a man in relation to Things, separating those that he has artificially constructed from those that have been curated from nature. Rudolf gave life to the objects comprising the *Kunstkammer* through the acts of selection and ownership. He sought *artificiala* that came with stories and *naturalia* surrounded by scientific mystery. Every piece that entered Rudolf's collection acted as a medium between the Thing's context—geographical, cultural, historical—and the emperor himself. In a sense, every Thing acts as a religious fetish, encapsulating a livingness that outlives the human body, which initially inscribed the object with an animistic spirit. Rudolf's relationship with his things emerges from the pre-capitalist, religiously dominated predecessor of our world wherein, as Marx phrased it, "productions of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life, and enter into relation both with one another and the human race."[10] Rudolf's objects of and for the study of nature demonstrate his desire to grasp the products of what could be described as "God's labor."

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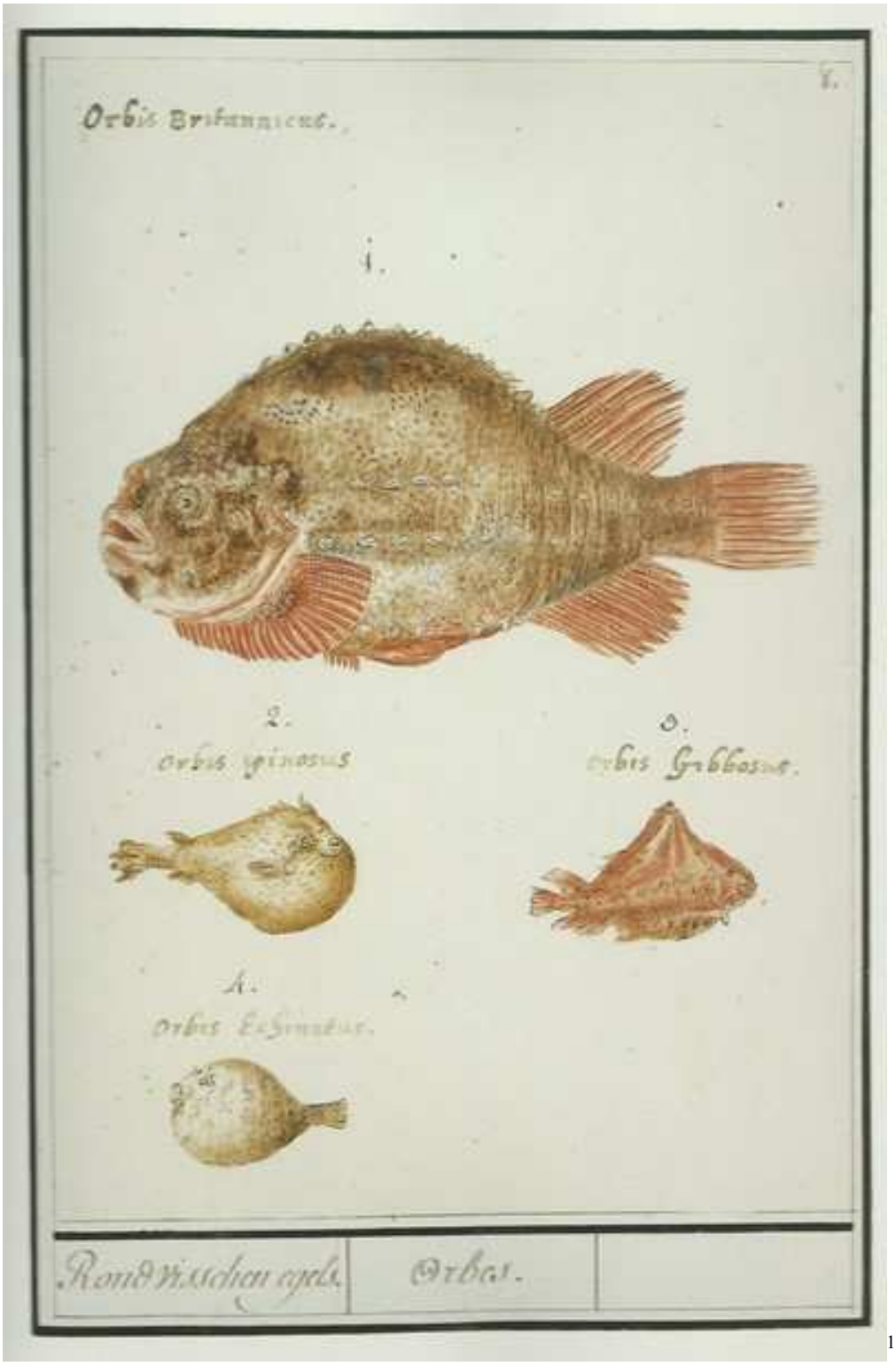
[9] Marshall, *The Magic Circle*, 39.
[10] Karl Marx, "The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof" in *Capital Volume 1* (2005).



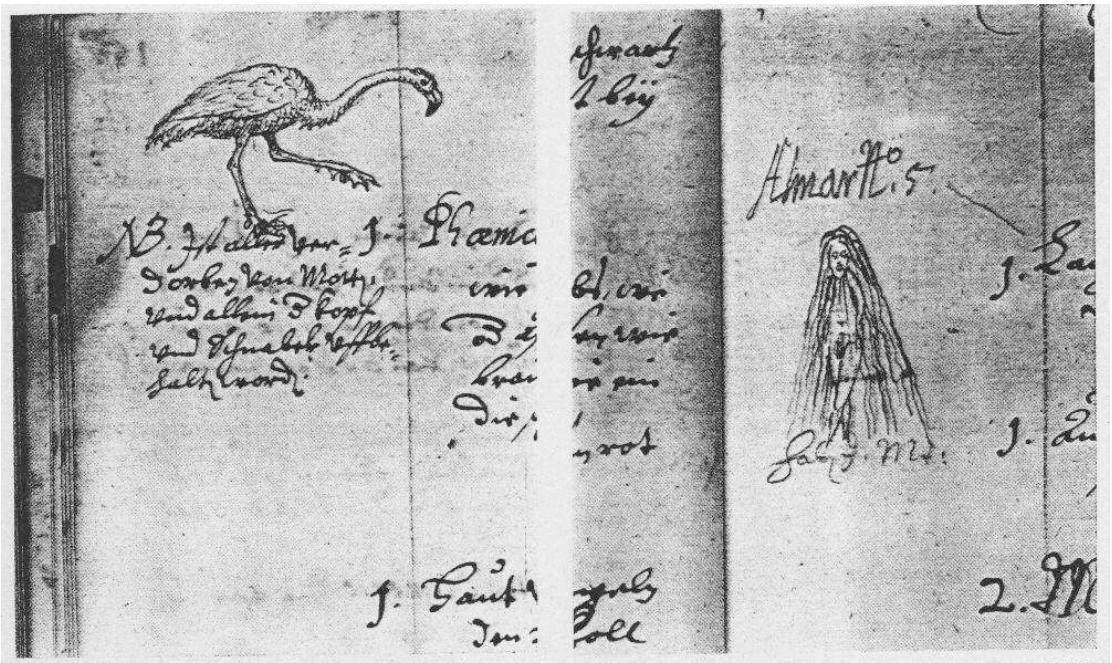
[11]

[11] From *De Albums van Anselmus de Boodt (1550 - 1632): Geschilderde natuurobservatie aan het Hof van Rudolf II te Praag*. De Boodt was the personal physician of Rudolf II and published/illustrated an *Historia Naturalis* for the court.

Chapter I: “¿Qué gigantes?”

The pieces of nature that Rudolf domesticated in his collection were conduits through which the emperor harnessed the godliness inherent to Things independent of and encapsulated by the human world. These contents of the *Kunstkammer* were not objects but instruments—the means by which Rudolf could touch the farthest corners of the universe. The particular items of Rudolf’s collection represented aspects of the universe in their entirety; that is to say, the devil’s portrait in the *Codex Gigas* was a conduit to the underworld, Tycho Brahe’s celestial globe a facsimile of the cosmos. It is likely that Rudolf understood his ownership of these universal microcosms as the means by which he could exercise influence over their referents. In the *Golden Bough*, James Frazer describes the morphology of what he terms “Sympathetic Magic,” a type of magical thinking that draws a mystical connection between like objects and people. If two things are connected—either by former proximity or similarity—an action performed on one will affect the other. For example, Frazer describes a ritual in which a piece of the body—like a hair or tooth—is used as a conduit for spells that affect the whole person. The underlying principle of Frazer’s examples and Rudolf’s intents is that there is a magical quality in material control—taking possession of something outside of one’s self creates the condition for a connectedness to the world that goes beyond the singular body.

We can clearly see a parallel between these rituals and Rudolf’s engagement with his collection if we understand its pieces as the hairs, nails, and extremities of the universe. Having and knowing these objects was much more important to the Emperor than presenting them.



6., 7. Links: Randzeichnung aus dem Inventar von 1607/11, fol. 15′. Rechts: Randzeichnung aus dem Inventar von 1607/11, fol. 35′

10., 11. Links: Randzeichnung aus dem Inventar von 1607/11, fol. 11′. Rechts: Randzeichnung aus dem Inventar von 1607/11, fol. 45′ [12]

[12] Pages from the inventory of the *Kunstkammer*. Images taken from transcription: Bauer, R. and H. Haupt, "Das Kunstkammerinventar Kaiser Rudolfs II. 1607-1611."

Chapter I: "¿Qué gigantes?"

The *Kunstkammer* is often described as a "theater of the world" or "memory theater," but its *representatio* was not performed. Though rumors of the contents of his collection were widespread, the *Kunstkammer* was never a public display—very few people besides the Emperor ever saw its interior. Many of Rudolf's prized possessions were not shown but were stored in meticulously catalogued cabinets. As the essentially unseen site of Rudolf II's sympathetic magic, the *Kunstkammer* fulfilled the function of a sacred space, existing as a myth to the exterior world. Because Rudolf's methods of representing his collection were not primarily visual, the *Kunstkammer* was able to exist indefinitely through language. The Emperor's fear of the dissolution of his object-legacy was confirmed posthumously when his collection was pillaged by the Swedes in the mid 17th century; it was through contemporaneous letters and documents that we have learned not only what objects were held in the *Kunstkammer* but the stories of how they were acquired.

The non-representation of the *Kunstkammer* and the expansive discourse surrounding it take on meaning as mythological space, adding a social dimension to its private sacredness. As Holy Roman Emperor, Rudolf II bore the title of a history of power intertwined with myth, a child of the Habsburg family and its connection to the political lore of classical Rome. The iconic image of court-artist Arcimboldo's composite portrait paints Rudolf as Vertumnus, the Roman god of seasons and transformations. This allusion to the Habsburgs' reign over the natural world is repeated in Arcimboldo's series of composite heads representing the four seasons and another representing the four elements. As art historian Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann states, Arcimboldo's portraits are heavily symbolic, and thus, that the portraits commissioned by the Habsburgs were almost entirely of composite heads is not accidental—they allude to a prophecy of the

founding of Rome. Kaufmann references an anecdote from Livy’s account of Roman Emperor Tarquin’s acquisition of Gabii. While the Romans “were digging the foundations of the temple, a human head came to light with the face perfect; this appearance unmistakably portended that the spot would be the stronghold of empire and the head of all the world.”[13] The symbol of the severed head that is repeated in Arcimboldo’s imagery references the mythological founding of Rome, and in doing so, reforms stories that will become the mythos of the new Holy Roman Empire.

[14]

If Rudolf II sought to write a mythology of his life, why would he choose a private material collection as the form by which he would inscribe his autobiography for the future? I think back to my own experiences of museum spaces when I consider

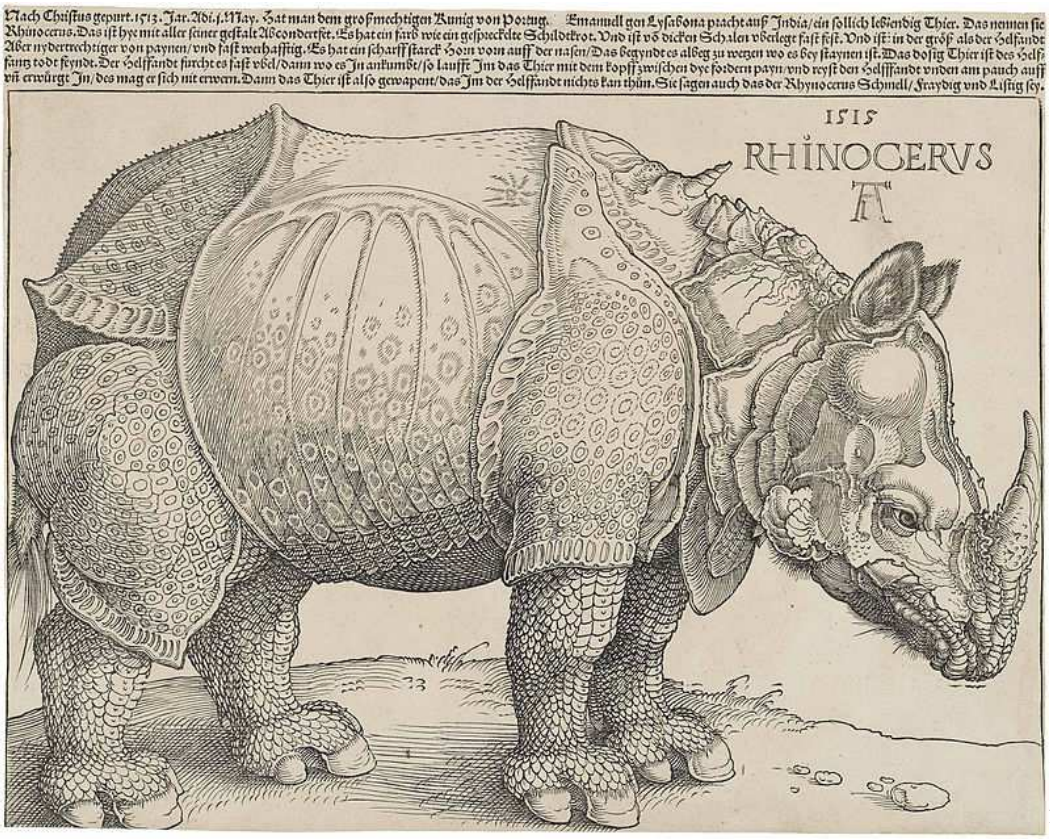
[13] Titus Livius, *The History of Rome, Vol. 1* trans. by Rev. Canon Roberts (J. M. Dent & Sons, Ltd: London, 1905).
[14] Rudolf II as Vertumnus (the Roman God of the Seasons) by Giuseppe Arcimboldo, 1591. Skokloster Castle, Sweden.

Chapter I: "¿Qué gigantes?"

Rudolf's collecting and desire for objects—objects that mark the progress of mankind and predict the scientific control of nature that will define progress in the future. As Holy Roman Emperor, Rudolf II had the socioeconomic power to acquire the objects of his desire; nothing material was out of his reach—that which could not be sought and acquired was commissioned and fabricated for the *Kunstkammer*. It is difficult to ascertain whether the *ennui* catalyzed by material excess pre-existed the commodity capitalism with which it is contemporarily associated, or if commodity culture has simply been projected onto the history of human relationships with objects. Fast-forward 300 years, and the historicized picture of Rudolf II could easily be mistaken as a Citizen Kane.

The psychological dimensions of Rudolf's drive to collect, while different from capitalist modern-day expressions, echo our own experiences with material possessions today. In the *System of Objects*, Jean Baudrillard writes of the collector that his mania provides a feeling of immortality, assuaging human death-anxieties. Because the collection is never finished, it remains alive, acting as a false mirror for the collector who unconsciously believes that s/he will be as immortal as his/her things. This psychological function of collecting certainly held true for Rudolf's practice, which we can see in both the things he chose to collect and the ways that he collected them. The emperor went to great lengths to pursue objects that he wished to acquire, sending his dignitaries all over the world—sometimes for years—to bring him everything from rare manuscripts to a live rhinoceros. As long as he was searching for something, the emperor perhaps felt that he could stay alive through the (vicarious) action of hunt. Rudolf was very superstitious and often sought out objects that he believed would prolong his life, such as bezoars, which

were thought to have curative powers. These anxieties seemed to culminate when one of the emperor's most prized possessions—his pet lion—passed away; Rudolf saw the death as an omen that he himself was going to die, and three days later, he did.[15]



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[15] Marina Belozerskaya, *The Medici Giraffe and Other Tales of Exotic Animals and Power* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2006).
[16] Albrecht Dürer, 1515 woodcut. This print currently held at the British Museum.

Chapter I: “¿Qué gigantes?”